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Read the Books!

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Perhaps it was an omen of my future life with West Indian literature that I grew up in the town next to Jamaica (New York), from which there were frequent trains direct to Babylon. More prosaically, my engagement with West Indian literature actually began around 1971, while I was writing a dissertation in Comparative Literature (perhaps some stray sound waves from the vociferous ACLALS conference of 1971 were drifting my way?). I was about to come out of graduate school as a practitioner of a kind of intellectual history made fine-grained by close reading, and as it turns out, all my work in a variety of fields has remained close to that base. But one personal trait that suited me for comparative literature was compulsive reading, and that's why the dissertation research was accompanied by reading a lot of things I had never heard of before, which initially included the early, genial novels of Naipaul, Brathwaite's *Arrivants*, Wilson Harris and (soon) Walcott's *Another Life*. It was an astonishing surprise, like suddenly discovering (as I did at the same time) that Beethoven wrote quartets. As it happened, I went from Yale to Boston University at the same time the Jamaican critic Michael Cooke made the opposite move, but in Boston I profited from the legacy of Caribbean books he had ordered at the library. And soon after, Brathwaite was at Boston University for a couple of semesters, based in African American Studies but hanging out with the anthropologists of the journal *Ethnopoetics*. For an American considering a move into Caribbean studies at that historical moment, Kamau's encouragement was crucial, and his advice was simple: establish credibility; read all the books. The upshot was a year at Mona, during which I indeed read everything and listened to everyone (apparently they thought I was very shy, but after all I was learning a language).

A third factor has been most important in *shaping* my interest in West Indian literature: three years of high school Greek, culminating in a year-long research seminar on Homer and the lively debate about the orality of the epics. Not only has that background contributed to how I approach questions of Caribbean orature and performance; it has led me to bring Caribbean lessons to bear on the European canon: for example, when I teach Chaucer I have the students listen to – and learn from – Linton Kwesi Johnson. And here I tip my hat to Barbara Lalla's *Postcolonialisms* (2008), a fine book whose Caribbean perspective on early modern British literature has only encouraged me in such mischief.

What did the field of West Indian literature look like at the moment I stumbled into it? The Allis bibliography admirably delineates the state of the art, especially in its chronological, annotated list of articles, which so clearly depicts the rapid unfolding of Caribbean criticism (329-349). There were urgent, galvanizing quarrels going on: about identity, nationhood, "Africanness," orality and literacy, artistic craft and political activism, etc. Everyone was involved in these conversations. And "everyone" was a remarkable assortment. My home turf

was the Mona campus, a gathering of extraordinary people by any measure, ranging from the South African poet F.T. Prince to Ras Dizzy. We desperately need a social history of that place at that time (if only Gordon Rohlehr had been there with his notebook!).

After Jamaica, the next challenge was devising opportunities to teach Caribbean literature. For most literary academics in my America at that time, Caribbean literature in English was at best invisible and more often simply inconceivable. A repeated proposal that it was time to establish a course rubric on “English literature other than British and American” (as it would then have been called) was simply ignored (one senior colleague pointed out helpfully that we already did the Irish). My first courses in the field were smuggled in as offerings for African American Studies. I began publishing in the field around 1980 – the challenges of publishing are familiar to all Caribbean scholars, and there will be more to say about that.

Most of my publications begin as responses to what I perceive as gaps in our knowledge of Caribbean literature; they are dedicated to recounting histories, so by their nature they tend to describe quarrels rather than participate in them. My book on West Indian poetry, for example, begins with an account of the debates at ACLALS in 1971. What I do is literary history, so I usually set out not from a position but from a question: “is there still a West Indian literature?” or “How shall the history of West Indian literature be told?” The book on poetry is fundamentally literary history, though it also conveys some sense of the forces driving developments, and provides categories for thinking about poetic practices in the region. As usual, I also wanted to offer some things that seemed to be missing from the extant literary histories. Two things had been especially neglected. One was attention to the multilingual regional context, highlighting important developmental and programmatic analogies or differences between West Indian experience and that in other parts of the region. The other, perhaps more important, was an account of the particular ways that poetry developed in individual islands/territories. The Caribbean is the preeminent laboratory for cultural studies, and that has always seemed to me the most compelling reason to work in the region. Each island constitutes a petri dish in which roughly the same ingredients have been mixed in different proportions and cultivated under different conditions. Scholars of the Caribbean shouldn’t miss the opportunity this presents for controlled comparisons of everything from divergent developments of creole languages to the evolution of specific poetic tropes. The results of work in the Caribbean laboratory provide tools that not only enable disciplined application of creolization theory to North American, but (even farther afield) to such issues as the global Chinese diaspora and its cultural consequences.

The book on Eric Roach was also a matter of filling a gap. Here was an unquestionably major poet with a substantial body of work that almost no one was talking about at all. The primary objective was to give a comprehensive account of Roach's work as a poet, which could serve as basis and incentive for further study by others. In drawing attention to the work of a neglected writer (and how many West Indian writers cannot be considered neglected?), I kept in mind Walcott's frequent quip about the bright-eyed reader who shook his hand saying, "I liked your new book so much I was up all night deconstructing it!" To avoid being that reader, I could do no better than to follow the example of our great writer-critics, who managed to be tough judges and nurturing advocates at the same time – I had in mind especially Mervyn Morris, a model of how to review creative work.

The title *Black Yeats* was pragmatically designed to sell books in the American market (mimicking the demonstrated effectiveness for that purpose of such titles as *Black Athena* and *Black Apollo*). Circumstances however conspired against my hope to make Roach not only visible again in the Caribbean, but also visible for the first time to readers of poetry (and anthologists) in the UK and USA. The book was originally to have been published by Heinemann, which would have put it in the hands of a wide metropolitan audience. But while the book was literally in production, Heinemann was bought and absorbed by Praeger, and Praeger exercised its right to cancel the contract, saying "we don't published this kind of book." So a word to the wise: if your publisher is for sale, make other plans.

My current book project on performance poetry is centrally about Jamaican writing, though it includes a couple of St. Lucian poets who studied at Mona during crucial periods. Again my motivation is less to participate in arguments than to fill gaps: the pre-history of performance poetry in Jamaica (that is, the native tradition "before Brathwaite"), significant writers fully aware of performance poetry and the issues it raises who chose to do something different, and theoretical issues raised by performance poetry, which has up to now generally been approached from a sociological or thematic perspective.

Apart from book projects, while I'm always interested in new writers, I expect my scholarship will remain grounded in authors who were established by about 1980 (including some much earlier ones, such as the PNP poets of the pre-independence era). Lately I've been tending to write about compelling poets whose work has been somewhat overshadowed by Brathwaite and Walcott – particularly Morris, Scott, Baugh, and Hippolyte.

How has the field changed over time? There was a fairly dark period about a decade ago, when both the Longman and Heinemann Caribbean lists had gone out of print and nearly every conference paper seemed to be either about work so recent that most of the presentation was plot summary or about Jamaica Kincaid.

Even in the Caribbean at that time, one could not presume that a scholarly audience would be familiar with the most canonical texts of West Indian literature. It was during those years that a few of us developed the habit of ending talks with the mantra, “read the books.”

Conditions have changed for the better – thanks in part to the heroic dedication of Peepal Tree Press. Even today, however, West Indian literature is poorly represented at the major North American literary conference, that of the enormous Modern Language Association. In particular, hardly any scholars based in the Caribbean participate; the perception has been that for proposed papers to be accepted for presentation there they must be couched in one of a handful of voguish metropolitan critical jargons, and you will hear scholars say that they refuse to be colonized by “the Master’s Language Association.” Who can argue against such righteous signifying?

In recent years the first great generation of West Indian critics has retired. Conditions were such that they all participated in all the debates, driven by urgent issues of the era. When I began, the arena was cultural politics; when critics gathered the topics were invitations to quarrel: “the function of the artist,” politics vs. aesthetics in poetry, English vs. creole language of expression, “who is West Indian?,” “What should our writers be writing about?” A generation later, these seemingly perennial rallying points are all but gone, and critical practice has diversified tremendously. These days, we are not all talking about the same things. Our conference themes are no longer calls to arms but commodious umbrellas, often metaphorical: horizons, islands, waves, vistas... There are some occasional flashpoints, but the enterprise of Caribbean literary criticism no longer has so salient a profile, or so sharp a cutting edge. The shouting is much reduced – though not absent. The scholarship has become diverse, but also collaborative more than combative. During just the last year I’ve been introduced to important work being done by groups of scholars from various countries on such varied subjects as (to name only a few) the cultural impact of the West Indian Federation, the digital humanities in the Caribbean, and the history and implications of Irish indenture.

What are the challenges for West Indian literary studies in the near future? There is a pressing need for more editorial and bibliographic work. The first priority is to reprint materials that are in danger of being lost, but often such “lifeboat” editions lack any bibliographic information at all, and such information becomes increasingly difficult to track down as time passes. Gemma Robinson’s recent edition of Martin Carter sets a high standard of thoroughness and accuracy, and its evident value may inspire scholars to take on editorial projects. Digitization has made a strong start, and it promises to facilitate all kinds of research. We also need monographs. Many of our authors deserve comprehensive studies of their work, and very few have yet received them, so

there is much to be done. Critical advocacy of Caribbean authors must continue, but that is only part of the job. We critics need to connect readers with texts, and our goal should be to connect this literature with all readers of English – to make it *known*. This is a daunting task. For example, the American critic Jahan Ramazani has recently brought the work of Louise Bennett to the attention of American readers of poetry; however, at the same time nearly all of her recorded performances – once readily available on cassette tape – have vanished from the marketplace. Yet that is relatively a success story. West Indian poets, with very few exceptions, are not known at all to readers of poetry in the United States. Such a situation is in no one's interest. Another instance: the monumental scholarship of Gordon Rohlehr, because it was published only in Trinidad, is known to hardly more than a few specialists. Besides questions about what critics should be working on, there is the question of where to publish their results. As we all know from experience, an article in this field often needs to be substantially recast depending on whether it is offered to a Caribbean, an "Anglophone," an American, or a British journal. What requires no explanation in one case requires extensive explanation in another, because metropolitan readers are not yet familiar with the Caribbean context, or its history, or even its geography. I hang quite a bit of hope on that "yet."

There is much to be done – which is to say we will not get bored. Meanwhile, let's not be too fussy about questions like "what (or who) is West Indian?" Michael Bucknor has definitively sorted out which questions of that sort are productive and which are not, in his study of the Caribbean/Canadian nexus. Our fundamental mission as critics of Caribbean literature is simple: Read the books that present themselves. Persuade other people to read them. Talk about them. Repeat.

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